

VZCZCXRO7586
PP RUEHCHI RUEHDT RUEHNNH
DE RUEHHM #1035/01 2550208
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 120208Z SEP 06
FM AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1442
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI PRIORITY 1016
RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1511

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 001035

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KIRF](#) [PINR](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: VISIT OF AMBASSADOR HANFORD TO HCMC: OFFICIAL MEETINGS

REF: HANOI 1666

HO CHI MIN 00001035 001.2 OF 002

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford told GVN officials during a August 14-16 visit that he welcomed the progress that Vietnam has made on religious freedom over the past two years. However, additional progress was needed, especially in the Northwest Highlands. Chairman of the National Committee for Religious Affairs -- also visiting HCMC -- acknowledged that progress in Northwest Highlands has been slow, but affirmed that the GVN is working to facilitate church registration there. The Chairman said that Vietnam would continue to implement the legal framework on religion -- its own laws -- irrespective of CPC. That said, Vietnam desired lifting of CPC. The Chairman welcomed Ambassador Hanford's suggestion of a "roadmap" that would delineate further progress on religious freedom in Vietnam as a mechanism to secure CPC lifting. HCMC government officials pledged to make further progress on religious freedom, but did not make any specific commitments on the issues that Ambassador Hanford raised, including property restitution and official NGO designation for the HCMC Catholic Archdiocese's HIV/AIDS program. Septel covers Ambassador Hanford's meetings with Protestant church leaders. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) During a visit to HCMC August 14 to 16, Ambassador John Hanford, accompanied by DRL/IRF advisor Clarissa Adamson, met with GVN, HCMC and Protestant Church leaders to review progress on religious freedom issues. In a lunch discussion, Ambassador Hanford told the National Chairman of the Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) Ngo Yen Thi and Protestant affairs specialist Nguyen Van Thong, that "Vietnam was an unfolding good news story." The substantial progress made over the past two years was a result of the hard work of Thi and his CRA colleagues. However, significant concerns remain. These concerns have an impact on the Congressional debate over extending Vietnam Permanent Normal Trading Relations (PNTR). Ambassador Hanford told Chairman Thi that the objective of his visit is to find a way forward on Vietnam's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) status. This requires Vietnam to show progress on remaining areas of concern, including: registration of churches in the North West and Central Highlands belong to the Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) and the Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV). The USG also is looking for registration of unofficial house church organizations such as the Mormons, United World Mission Church (UNWC) and Baptist groups.

¶3. (SBU) Responding to Ambassador Hanford's question on the slow pace of church registration in the NW Highlands, especially compared to the Central Highlands, Chairman Thi observed that it took Hanoi two years to achieve current gains in the Central Highlands. Although Hanoi is applying the "lessons learned" from the Central Highlands, the situation in the Northwest is

perhaps even more difficult. Protestantism is a new phenomenon in the Northwest. Thi acknowledged that Hanoi has been slow to train local officials in the NW on Protestantism and their obligations under the legal framework on religion. The spread of Protestantism in the Northwest has caused significant friction within some ethnic minority communities as some ethnic village leaders see the religion as a threat to traditional beliefs. Local governments need to ensure that church registrations do not undermine "community harmony." Another complicating factor is that the ECVN is far less organized than the SECV and does not have trained pastors to lead communities. CRA Specialist Thong also took strong issue with ECVN claims that it has over 700 congregations in the NW Highlands, saying that the number is far smaller and that some congregations are affiliated with other Protestant (house church) groups.

14. (SBU) To deal with these challenges, the CRA has been working with provincial governments in the NW Highlands on a series of "pilot registrations." Thi said that Lai Chau province has registered two ECVN congregations, Lau Cai four. (Comment: Embassy Hanoi has not yet confirmed these claims. End Comment.) Another five registrations are "in progress" in Thai Nguyen, "five or six" in Bac Can, and four in Yen Bai. Once local officials are more confident with the process and with their ECVN counterparts, the CRA can accelerate registrations. Meanwhile, in the Central Highlands, in addition to continuing the process of registration of SECV congregations, the CRA is working to introduce ethnic minority-language bibles in the three major ethnic languages (Bahnar, Ede, Jarai). Registrations for some house churches (Mormons, UMMC), two small Buddhist sects and the Baha'i are pending; other registrations will be considered once these registrations are concluded. The GVN also will continue "to consider" property restitution claims from the ECVN and the SECV. Thi also said that he has "solved" the problem of local officials rejecting petitions for national identity documents if the applicant declares that he is a Protestant. The Chairman asserted that he has instructed police in Thanh Hoa province to apologize to the house church preacher who was assaulted a few weeks ago and to reprimand officials

HO CHI MIN 00001035 002.2 OF 002

responsible. (See reftel for additional reporting on the Thanh Hoa incident.)

15. (SBU) Chairman Thi noted that Vietnam will comply with its own laws -- and thus continue the process of church registrations -- irrespective of the status of CPC. However, Thi hoped that CPC could be lifted soon. He welcomed Ambassador Hanford's idea of a "roadmap" that would cover additional GVN progress on religious freedom as part of a CPC-lifting strategy. Thi welcomed Ambassador Hanford's upcoming meetings with senior GVN officials including the Vice Minister of Public Security. Thi requested the Ambassador to assist him by pressing GVN interlocutors to instruct local governments to implement the legal framework on religion more aggressively. Chairman Thi also welcomed Ambassador Hanford's suggestion to bring CRA officials from key provinces to the U.S. on an exchange program on religious affairs.

16. (SBU) Chairman Thi noted that the GVN had resolved outstanding issues related to a Catholic church request to open a new seminary in Dong Nai province near HCMC. On August 21, officials from the Xuan Loc Bishop's Office confirmed that the diocese will open a seminary there, as a branch of the HCMC Seminary. This year's intake will be 68 students from the diocese. In 2007 the church plans to take additional students from three other dioceses: Ba Ria Vung Tau, Lam Dong and Phan Thiet. Groundbreaking for a new seminary building will take place on August 26.

17. (SBU) In a separate meeting with HCMC People's Committee Vice Chairman Nguyen Thanh Tai, the Ambassador lauded the HCMC government's recent decision to approve the opening of a new seminary for the SECV. He thanked the HCMC government for its leadership role in house church registrations. The Ambassador noted that the USG expects that this process will continue with

the registration of additional HCMC-based house church denominations and the resolution of outstanding SECV property claims, especially that of its former headquarters and another key property. The Ambassador also encouraged the HCMC government to support efforts of the Catholic Archdiocese to secure GVN recognition of its "Pastoral Care" HIV/AIDS program as an official Vietnamese NGO.

18. (SBU) Vice-Chairman Tai told the Ambassador that the HCMC government is working with provincial CRA officials to strengthen grassroots implementation of the legal framework on religion. Even in HCMC, local understanding of Hanoi's "clear policy" is not yet adequate. Tai said that he allocated recently substantial funds to district-level governments to facilitate the process of local registration of house churches. While supportive of Archdiocese efforts on HIV/AIDS, Tai made no commitment on its request for NGO designation. Tai said that he would work with the SECV on property restitution issue and would "study" their request for the return of two downtown HCMC properties.

19. (U) This message was cleared by Ambassador Hanford.
WINNICK